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ON CARAVAGGIO'S STORYTELLING

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Abstract: Analysis of the metamorphoses and subtexts designed by Caravaggio in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (Uffizi).
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Recovering and developing what was briefly anticipated several years ago, this study focuses on the figurative devices designed by Caravaggio in *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, exhibited in the Uffizi Gallery[1].

At first glance, it obviously represents the well-known episode narrated in the biblical book of Genesis (22:1-13).

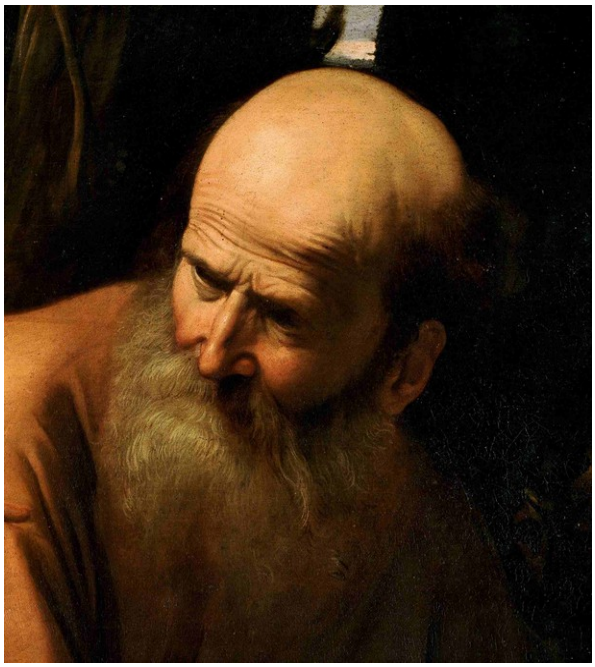
Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Uffizi [wikimedia.org].

1 See *Deconstructing Caravaggio and Velázquez*, 2012, p.2 [academia.edu], collected in *Italian-crafted. Studies 2012-2016*, pp.17-20 [archive.org].

However, there are paradoxes or anomalies in this composition, which also ambiguously represents an angry old man and a panicked young man, whose head is violently pressed against a stabbed heart-shaped element.

Notably, the painter distorted the young man's arm, suggesting that he too is grasping the same knife wielded by the older character.

Details



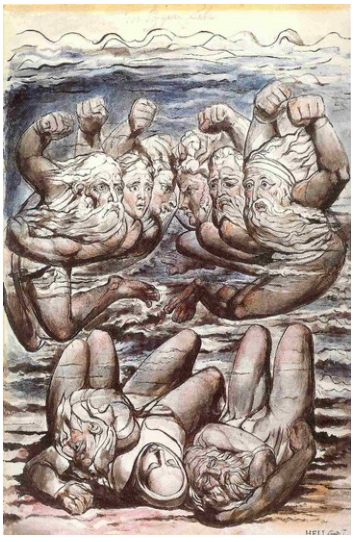
For context, it should be noted that Caravaggio and other great masters, in addition to allegorizing various meanings in a given form, also developed metamorphoses and deformations that made it possible to create sequences of events in a given narrative, or even to add a distinct but somehow related story.

Comparative example[2]

Titian, *The Vendramin Family*, National Gallery [wikimedia.org].
As expressed in the detail of the reliquary, a menorah transforms into a crucifix, synthesizing the logic of the Judeo-Christian religion.

Regarding the painting under analysis here, the aforementioned paradoxes form a complementary narrative: the young man was seized by an old man who accuses him of having killed someone (probably the old man's wife, symbolized by the stabbed heart). Furious, the old man now intends to give the young man the same treatment, but he is interrupted by an angel, who warns him of the condemnatory fate of those who let themselves be consumed by anger (e.g. Mt. 5:21-22, 38).

Note that, for example, Dante had also reserved a place in Hell for the wrathful (*Inferno*: VII-VIII).



William Blake, *The Stygian Lake*, National Gallery of Victoria [wikimedia.org].
An allegorical representation of the punishment of the wrathful, inspired by Dante's Inferno.

2 For more on this painting, see *Octógono*, extra number (20) / Nov. 3, 2025 – "The Vendramin Family by the skillful Titian (Tiziano)" [academia.edu | archive.org].

In this subtext devised by Caravaggio, the malevolent instigator appears on the left (sinister) side of the composition, in a lower position (contrasting symmetrically with the rigthful angel). Thus, the seemingly harmless ram is actually the deceiving Devil, about whom Saint Augustine had already warned how he could assume various forms, including that of a serpent[3].

Similarly, the Bible mentions that the serpent of Original Sin was actually the Devil himself in disguise (Rev.12:9). Thus, Caravaggio used the furthest horn to create the illusion of a reptile's tongue that incites evil and perdition. The boy is indeed a murderer, and the Devil-ram already has him under its control, but it also wants the old man's soul, who hesitates...

Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, det.

Jacob Matham, after Hendrik Goltzius, *The Fall of Man*, det., National Gallery of Art [wikimedia.org].

Therefore, while angels seek to correct mankind through civilized and rational behavior, demonic forces, in turn, promote animal instincts and the consequent fall into Hell[4].

This struggle of opposites reflects the free will of each human being, and is a subject frequently addressed in literature, whether by ancient pagans (e.g. Seneca, *De Ira*) or by modern Christians (e.g. Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio*).

Caravaggio does the same using a single image, which reveals his exceptional storytelling ability[5].

3 St. AUGUSTINE, *The City of God*, X:10, 27; XIV:8.

4 For example, in the Sistine Chapel, on each side of the *Last Judgment* the forces of good and evil literally pull individuals in opposite vertical directions.

5 In this same vein, note how in the painting titled *Basket of Fruit* the same artist essentially manages to anticipate and summarize Hemingway's *The Old man and the sea* (regarding that painting, see *The Leaves of Caravaggio*, 2013, [academia.edu], collected in *Italian-crafted. Studies 2012-2016*, pp.139-140 [archive.org]).